

GOVERNING WITH THE Christian Right



Episodes in Dover, Pa., and other districts might assuage administrators' fears that a religious conservative board majority brings excessive entanglement over religion

BY MELISSA M. DECKMAN

In October 2004, the school board in Dover, Pa., dominated by religious conservatives, made national headlines when it required high school biology teachers to read a statement about intelligent design to students before teaching about evolution. The statement said evolution was merely a theory, not a fact, and had "inexplicable" gaps.

Proponents of intelligent design argue that life is so complex that its origin can only be explained by an intelligent maker. They also contend intelligent design is secular and its use in public schools does not violate the First Amendment's prohibition against state-sponsored religion, unlike creationism whose use in public school science classes was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1987.

But in a federal trial brought by parents who opposed the Dover school board's curricular decision, Judge John E. Jones struck down the board's policy, finding the board majority was clearly motivated by its religious beliefs when it enacted the intelligent design plan.

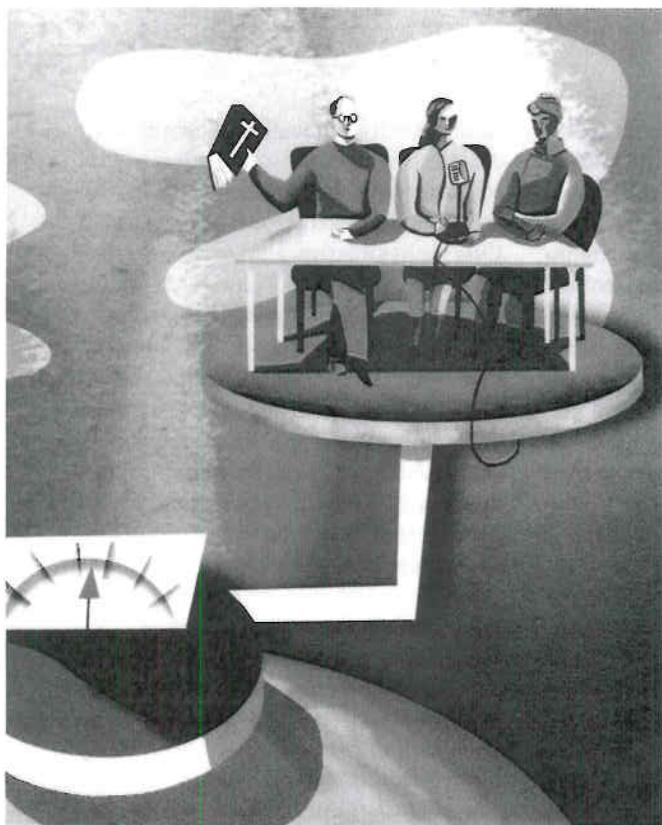
Dover's school board is not the first to enact education policy based on its members' religious views. In the 1990s, for example, conservative Christian school board majorities voted to remove references to homosexuals from class-

rooms in Merrimack, N.H.; promote American culture as superior to other cultures in history courses in Lake County, Fla.; and turn down state grants to provide free breakfast for poor students in Vista, Calif. In the latter instance, board members argued that such programs usurped parental responsibility.

Although such actions have garnered much media attention, do they typify how most Christian Right school board members govern? What can school system leaders expect of religious conservatives who are elected to their governing boards? A closer look at what took place in one school district might calm administrators' fears that a Christian Right board majority could bring excessive entanglement over religious issues in the public schools.

A Case Study

I studied the impact of the Christian Right on school board politics in Garrett County, Md., from 1994 to 1999. Garrett County is a predominately rural area located in the mountains of western Maryland bordering West Virginia. While most school districts in the state are large because they are composed of entire counties, Garrett County is by far one of the smallest with fewer than 5,000 students.



Politically, Garrett County is the type of place where it seems religious conservatives would find much success in enacting an ideologically driven agenda in local schools. In the past several presidential elections, for example, George W. Bush won well over 70 percent of the popular vote.

In 1994, three religious conservatives were elected to the five-member school board, joining another who had been elected in 1992. These members had close ties to the Christian Coalition, arguably the most politically influential Christian Right group in the 1990s, and ran on a platform designed to appeal to like-minded voters. Several even quoted Biblical scripture in their campaign advertisements.

Once elected, these religious conservatives were unafraid to question policies that offended their religious sensibilities. Nor were they afraid to question proposals that threatened to weaken local control of school programs at the hands of the state and federal government. (This continues to be a major concern among conservative Christian organizations, which argue that state and federal education agencies are "corrupted" by national education groups they deem too liberal, such as the National Education Association.)

The conservative majority did achieve

some success. The board of education approved a policy allowing high school valedictorians to offer prayer during their commencement speeches. The board also instituted a voluntary, abstinence-based sex education program for middle school children after school.

Yet the Christian Right majority in Garrett County did not initiate major changes to school policy for three reasons. First, the public served as a constraint upon a number of their more controversial proposals, engaging the board in constructive dialogue. Second, service on the school board lent to newly elected members a

closer proximity to the daily workings of the schools, revealing to them that certain programs operated differently "in action" than they might have anticipated.

Finally, differences among the conservative Christian school board members emerged, which had the effect of dividing the board and making policy changes more difficult.

Public Constraint

One example where public dialogue was essential to constraining the actions of the religious conservative majority occurred over the county's involvement with the federally sponsored School-to-Work program. The School-to-Work program gave students hands-on work experience after school and during the summer months through the involvement of area businesses in Garrett County. School officials decided to apply for a federal grant to expand the popular program to meet growing demand, a move initially opposed by some religious conservatives on the board.

Christian Right board members expressed concern that accepting federal grant money would jeopardize the school board's local control over the program. Moreover, religious conservatives feared students could ultimately be forced into participating against their wishes as some Christian Right organizations, such as

Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, have argued.

Parents and business owners crowded a special meeting in support of the federal grant proposal, as did the Maryland State Board of Education's assistant state superintendent for career and technology, who tried to allay the board members' fears about the program. Even though the federal grant required the establishment of "local labor market teams" to coordinate the program with local businesses, the assistant superintendent insisted the school board itself would decide how to manage these teams.

After a lengthy discussion, the Garrett County superintendent suggested the school board accept the grant proposal after a change in some of its language. He suggested that the grant specifically state that students would be given the opportunity, but not forced, to participate in a career experience. The new language also would indicate the school board would be responsible for appointing the local market team members to coordinate the program with local businesses. As a result, the board unanimously approved the administration's request to pursue the School-to-Work grant.

School Operations

The School-to-Work episode showcases how the community served as a check upon the Christian Right majority when it initially pursued unpopular changes. It also demonstrates that the religious conservative majority was willing to compromise about education programs once they learned how such programs actually work. The board majority's previous knowledge about federal programs such as School-to-Work was shaped by the views of Christian Right organizations, who generally advocate avoiding any unnecessary entanglement with the federal government.

A similar example took place with respect to the county's use of outcomes-based education, or OBE. In the 1990s, Christian Right advocacy groups, such as the Family Research Council, railed against OBE, a learning system of instruction and management that had been implemented in schools districts around the nation.

Essentially, OBE was a reform move-

ment geared at having school districts be explicit about what students should know and when. (Ironically, Christian Right opposition to President Bush's call for mandatory state testing in his No Child Left Behind Act has been muted compared with its earlier opposition to OBE and other programs that required routine assessments of students.)

Christian Right organizations, however, feared that what the "outcomes" students would be required to learn under OBE would not be based on factual information. Instead, they believed such outcomes were designed to measure "politically correct" attitudes that students must meet before being allowed to advance another grade.

Robert Holland of the Family Research Council wrote in its monthly journal *Family Policy* (January 1994) that OBE proponents had in mind to require outcomes that had "less to do with whether Johnny can comprehend the Federalist Papers or place the Civil War in the correct half-century than with the acquisition of the

desired attitudes on such issues as global resource inequality, multiculturalism, homelessness, alternative lifestyles and environmentalism."

Sparked in part by the school administration's desire to switch to an outcomes-based system of grading physical education students (a move the board rejected), the Garrett County school board decided to review OBE procedures already in use in the school system, a move that met resistance from parents, teachers and administrators, who crowded a special session of the board to express their displeasure.

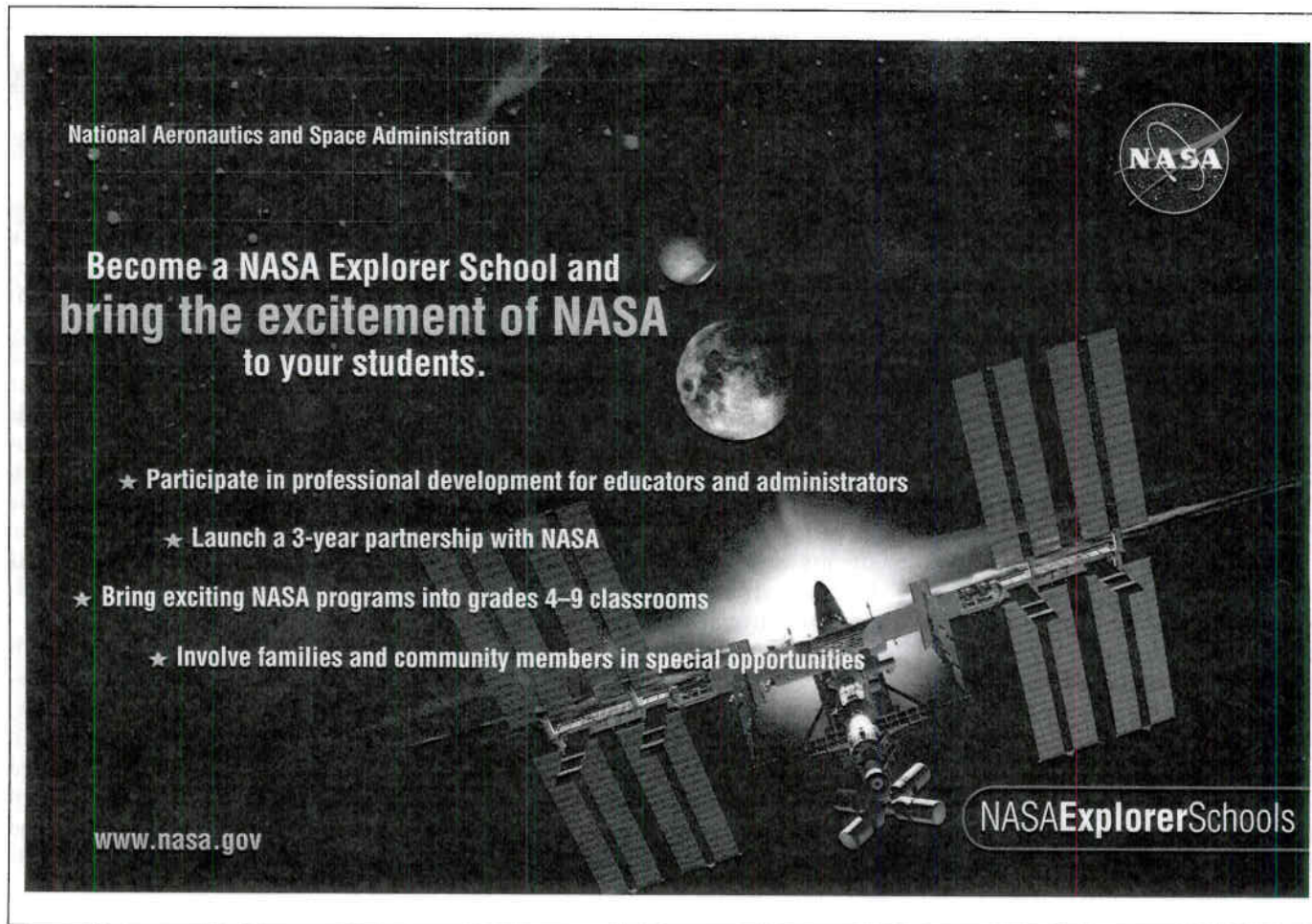
It became apparent at this meeting that each party involved had a different idea of what OBE actually meant. The superintendent explained that OBE, as it was used in Garrett County, was simply a series of goals for students to meet before passing to the next grade level. Maryland law mandates that all schools must participate in the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program, which consists of a series of assessment tests in

reading, writing, social studies and mathematics.

Christian Right board members, however, voiced concerns about MSPAP. One believed the assessment method required too much subjective grading by teachers. Another argued this method of teaching gets away from the "concrete measurement of facts, attempting to measure things that are very difficult to measure." As an example, he read aloud a MSPAP social studies outcome from one grade level that said "students will demonstrate attainment of a positive self-concept and empathy toward others in order to improve interaction among individuals and groups in our democratic society." He pushed for a more traditional approach to teaching social studies and other subjects.

Ideas Misinterpreted

The non-Christian Right board member defended the use of OBE in the Garrett County schools, saying business leaders were seeking graduates who can think



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critically, which is a central focus of outcome-based education. She criticized Christian Right board members for claiming teaching methods under OBE did not emphasize basic skills.

The views of the non-Christian Right board member, the school superintendent, and many parents in the audience who supported the MSPAP program ultimately convinced the conservative Christian majority to appoint an ad-hoc committee of parents and community leaders to investigate how OBE related to the Garrett County schools.

The OBE committee reported its findings several months later and found the central problem was terminology, concluding that words used by professional educators such as "critical thinking" often were misinterpreted. The committee offered its own definition of OBE as it was being used in Garrett County schools and identified various controversial issues that had come to be associated incorrectly with OBE, such as teaching values and beliefs. The committee recommended Garrett County reject the proposed actions of the religious conservative faction.

The committee also recommended the school system prepare a standard format to include specific content for each

grade level's program of study and distribute a parent edition of the syllabus. The school board ultimately agreed to the committee's recommendations.

Non-Monolithic Views

There was one additional reason the Christian Right majority in Garrett County did not adopt the radical changes their critics had feared. As with many majority coalitions in government, differences began to emerge among members of the Christian Right, at least with respect to issues such as textbook adoption.

In 1997, the school board appointed a curriculum committee of community members to recommend a textbook for the Advanced Placement U.S. history course. But several of the conservative board members declared the committee's final choice, *A People and a Nation*, too "liberally biased." They added two other history books — both of them earlier rejected during the committee's extensive review — for the board's final vote for a U.S. history text. All three titles



were put on view to the public at the school board's office one month prior to the vote to facilitate community feedback.

The meeting in January 1998 to discuss the book again brought out a significant crowd of parents and activists. Several parents spoke out, including one who said the board's action to consider the two additional texts had undermined the com-

mittee's trust and expertise.

Several religious conservative board members formally stated their opposition to the curriculum committee's selected text, including one who argued the book depicted Ronald Reagan in an unfavorable light and that it contained too many references to women in history. He claimed the book carried a liberal bias and said he wondered "if the majority of citizens would want to spend tax dollars on the text."

But the conservatives weren't unified in their disapproval of the recommended text. One supported the book, despite his own differences in political leanings. He recounted his favorite class from high

A National Portrait of Religious Conservative Candidates

In 1998, I conducted a national survey of school board candidates drawn from 300 randomly selected school districts nationwide. Of the 1,220 candidates who were contacted, 671 returned usable surveys for a response rate of 55 percent.

While the emphasis of the survey was on the campaign (and not the governing) process, it does offer a glimpse of what religious conservative candidates believed were the most pressing education issues at the time they were running for office.

I categorized religious conservatives as those candidates who identified with Christian Right organizations (as members or supporters of such groups) and who also held most of the same education views espoused by such organizations, such as support for creationism or abstinence-based sex education.

Based on these two criteria, 19 percent of school board candidates were considered part of the Christian Right. These candidates were remarkably similar to candidates who were not religious conservatives. Christian Right candidates were not more likely to win than non-Christian Right candidates, nor were they regionally concentrated in certain areas of the country. They tended to share similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and relatively few candidates received endorsements, campaign contributions or other help with their campaigns from interest groups and political parties.

Religious conservatives did differ from other types of candidates when it came to the reasons they ran for the school board. Christian Right candidates were more likely than other candidates to say that applying their religious or moral beliefs to education

policy and returning schools to "traditional values" were somewhat or very important to their decisions to run for school board.

Such findings might cause school administrators some concern that Christian Right board members will be preoccupied with bringing religion into public classrooms. However, an examination of the campaign platforms of such candidates does not seem to indicate that most religious conservatives run for school board with the intention of making radical changes to school policy.

As with other candidates, religious conservatives, while running for office, stressed the need to raise student test scores, to deal with budget and revenue issues and to address the technological needs of schools far more than hot-button issues such as sex education.

— Melissa Deckman

school, which he said was taught by a "very liberal" teacher. He recalled how he spent much of his time debating with the teacher about various issues, an experience that was great for the learning process. He argued that it did not matter whether the textbook was balanced because the goal in education is to have "worldly wise children" and to leave it to teachers "to round things out."

The board ultimately adopted by a 3-2 margin the more liberal *A People and a Nation* for use by students, suggesting Christian Right board members are not monolithic in their views. In this case, two conservative Christian board members were willing to let their views on ideology take a back seat to other concerns.

That fall two of the Christian Right board members opted not to seek re-election. The meant that by 1999, religious conservatives no longer constituted a board majority. But while in office, the Christian Right majority in Garrett County showed a willingness to listen to the views of parents and administrators,

perhaps because they themselves believed a local governing board should be open to the views of the public.

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Religious Decisions

The six-year situation in Garrett County shows that religious conservatives do not necessarily govern by placing their personal religious views above all else. It also suggests superintendents should use community support to question suspect policies proposed by religious conservatives.

Moreover, superintendents would be wise to help all board members — religious conservatives or not — navigate particularly complex programs that operate within their school districts, particularly those that involve state or federal components. Time invested initially by school leaders might help correct any misperceptions about education policy that newly elected board members bring with them to office.

However, just as the recent case in Dover, Pa., and previous episodes in the 1990s show, there are times when Christian Right board majorities do enact policies largely on the basis of their religious convictions. In such cases, it is important to remember two things.

First, policies that overtly attempt to mix church and state in the public schools will likely be struck down by the federal courts. While religious conservatives have expressed interest in pursuing intelligent design programs in the public schools, the recent federal court decision may make that legally difficult to do.

Judge Jones's decision went beyond the narrow issue of whether the Dover board of education was motivated by its religious beliefs in enacting the controversial policy. He tackled the larger question of whether intelligent design itself qualified as science. Jones wrote that intelligent design was "an interesting theological argument" but "not science"

in the hope that it would prevent what he called the "obvious waste of judicial and other resources which would be occasioned by a subsequent trial[s]..." over this very issue.

Second, the public has ultimate discretion when it comes to the makeup of school boards. School board elections often are marked by low voter turnout, which can lead to success for ideologically extreme candidates who run well-organized campaigns. But when such candidates actually form majorities on school boards and try to ram through policies that reflect their religious or ideological biases rather than those of the community, they typically are not re-elected.

In Dover last fall, seven of the eight board members who supported the intelligent design policy were booted out by voters, a pattern repeated many times in the 1990s (including in each of the cases referenced earlier). Voters have little patience with school board members who put a narrow agenda above the responsible management of the school system.

Democracy Reigns

Governing with Christian Right board members might offer certain challenges for public school administrators, but probably not more than governing with any board members whose ideological views fall outside of the mainstream. Being patient no doubt helps, as does enlisting the support of the public in keeping such board members from enacting policies that either fall out of step with community norms or, in the case of religion, raise constitutional concerns.

But administrators should take heart that the democratic process is alive and well. A school board majority that is bent on instituting a religiously based agenda will likely not last long, especially when such an agenda distracts from the core mission of the public schools. ■

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